

## LIFE STORY



# Ava is a winner!

Ava Hopper overcame cataracts in both eyes to be one of 12 Irish students who won a scholarship to study German, writes **Sheila O'Kelly**

Sixteen-year-old Ava Hopper, from Malahide in Co Dublin, recently returned from Germany having won a three-week study scholarship there. Ava was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes when she was 13. She immediately needed cataracts removed from both eyes and laser surgery in one eye.

As if that wasn't enough, the following year Ava was diagnosed with coeliac disease (allergic to gluten) – which is quite common in people who have diabetes.

Despite all these setbacks and missing several months from school, Ava still managed to get nine As and one B in the Junior Cert.

In fact, Ava's German results were among the top 50 in Ireland. These 50 stu-

dents got a chance to win a scholarship to go to a German school for three weeks. Like the others, Ava was interviewed by a panel that included representatives from the Department of Education and Skills, the Goethe Institute and the German Embassy.

Ava then went to Germany with 11 others chosen from this group of 50.

Ava had never been away from home before the trip so both she and her parents were anxious about the host family being able to cope.

The German Embassy helped out and in the family where Ava was placed in Fürstenzelle, the mother was a nurse and the father a doctor.

"It was really good," said Ava. "I was a

bit homesick, but when I got back home, I just wanted to go back.

"Two days a week we had two full days' school. The 12 of us had a class together in the morning and then in the afternoon, we'd have a German partner who we'd go to class with."

Ava found that the Germans ate an awful lot of food and she had no low blood sugars while away, whereas she would normally have some lows at home over a three-week period.

"Over here my blood sugars are between 4 and 7. Over there they were about 8 or 9 because they eat so much food at every meal. They have breakfast, and at 1 they have a dinner, and they have another dinner at 7.

"So you eat two dinners a day and you're like stuffed going to bed. They were like, 'you need to eat up, you're so thin' and I was like 'I'm ok'," said Ava.

Ava transferred from Temple Street to Beaumont Hospital earlier this year.

"Beaumont put me on the carb-counting plan. I used to be on just a set dose at meals and now I am on the carb counting. I think that is much better because you can eat what you want.

"I didn't know about carb counting until I went to Beaumont. I think when you are older they give you a lot more responsibility than when you are in Temple Street. I think it's better and I plan to do the DAFNE (dose adjustment for normal eating) programme when I am 18," said Ava.

Ava has increased her knowledge about diabetes considerably since she was first diagnosed. When they told her then she had diabetes, she didn't even know what it meant.

"I had been really thirsty – but I didn't think anything of it – for over six months before I was diagnosed. I went to a doctor because I used to get headaches all the time but nobody thought anything of that either. I was really light, I was only 4 stone.

"The hospital team said I must have had diabetes for about a year to have developed such severe symptoms," said Ava.

Ava had the cataracts removed very shortly after she was diagnosed with dia-

betes. Her eyesight is fine now, although she needs glasses for very small print.

At first, Ava found it quite hard to adapt to her diet but she has adjusted well now.

"When my friends first heard about my diabetes they were going 'oh god, can you not come over to my house'. I said no, I still can. I explained it to them and the only real thing they are worried about is me having a hypo, but once you tell them what to do and they know the signs, it's fine.

"My friends now know the signs if I am going low – like if I got really dizzy or started talking in a weird way. Now they're

grand and they don't think anything of it," said Ava.

Ava usually knows herself when she is going low. She tests her blood sugars four times a day.

"Usually for me, anything under 4 is a low. I can feel it, if it's 3.9 or 3.8 I can just tell. But even if I haven't done a blood sugar, if it is around 2 I know because I start to see colour spots in my eyes," said Ava.

Ava's advice to any other teenager diagnosed with diabetes is not to panic!

"Once you learn about it you'll be alright."

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